

Klaus A. Schnitzer

Objects Out of Context

Photo by the author.

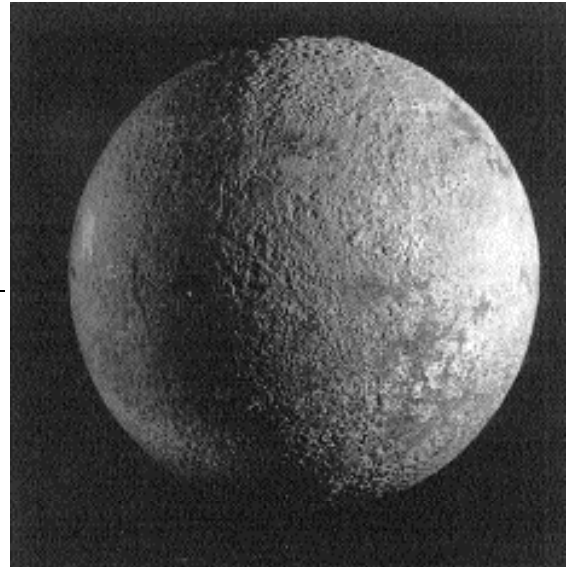
The Fine Arts Department of Montclair State University in New Jersey began its relationship with the National Park Service in 1982.

A field trip of my Advanced Photography class to the former immigration station at Ellis Island led to a series of documentary/interpretive workshops which culminated in a major exhibition and accompanying book. This event coincided with the reopening of the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in 1990.

One of my graduate students in the first Ellis workshop, Brian Feeney, was able to secure a staff appointment as the staff photographer at Ellis Island. He consequently became our liaison and collaborator in the Ellis project. His transfer to the Gateway National Recreation Area brought about the opportunity to begin a new collaborative project of photographing the abandoned military structures at Fort Hancock on the Sandy Hook Peninsula which is part of Gateway.

While an immigration station and a coastal defense fort may appear to have little in common, they offer two things that have been essential to the success of these projects: access to significant historic structures and an extensive collection of artifacts from these sites. Although formal documentary photography has always been part of the process, students, faculty from MSU, and visiting artists could concentrate most of their efforts on producing the type of interpretive work that reflects their fine arts background.

In my many years at Ellis Island I became fascinated with items that would be collected, stored, indexed, computerized, and eventually exhibited. We normally think of museum holdings to have artifacts that are rare, display a high level of artistry, and have cultural significance. At Ellis Island the museum collection would include rusted buckets, old mops, broken institutional dishes from the 1930s, encrusted typewriters, and everything else that could be unearthed from these 27 acres of abandoned buildings. The artifacts that fascinated me most were utilitarian, which if found any other place would have been consigned to the junk pile. I started a series of photographs with a printmaker colleague of mine, Robert Sennhauser, that would document the museum artifacts in 8 x



10 Polaroid black & white on a solemn black background. A color 8 x 10 Polaroid showing the same item in a contemporary setting on how it could be used today became a companion piece (underwritten by a Polaroid artist's support grant). Combining the two images into a single frame for presentation we hoped to relay the sense of contradiction that was created when these simple pieces of "junk" were elevated to the status of a museum object. This was the beginning of our "Artifact Reuse Series." (A similar project was done for the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in Manhattan.)

Continuing with a similar theme, the items from the Sandy Hook collection that captured my attention were the pieces of unexploded ordinance found at this site. They range from traditional round cannon balls to 1,000 pound bottle-nosed shells. These objects of potential destruction were photographed like precious sculpture— out of context. Taken out of context a cannon ball, like the one that appears in the accompanying photograph, has been mistaken for a microorganism, a piece of modern sculpture, or most commonly, the Earth's moon. The viewer is given contradictory inputs—the visual versus the potential.

I thank the NPS and especially Felice Ciccione, the patient museum curator at Gateway National Recreation Area, and Brian Feeney for making these projects a reality.

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